

## Is There a Donor in This Class?

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It is not surprising that Stanley Fish feels his career's highest goal was to produce pleasure in him. After all, teaching the beauty of poetry for many years (of no useful purpose by his own argument) afforded him hours of enjoyment and was handsomely rewarded by wealthy institutes of higher education. Because of his international reknown, it should also not be surprising that he does not at all find this conclusion odd or embarrassing. It sounds as though he benefited fully from the perks of an academic life, and I have no choice but to admire him for admitting that the person his work most benefited was himself. To his credit, at least he does not pretend to have aspired to more.

Again not surprisingly, many of the scholars who are angriest at Fish are those who do a lot of work for very little money and none of the notoriety Fish enjoys. They don't agree that they do what they do for pleasure because, despite their best intentions and the memory that they *chose* this career, they are not having fun or becoming famous. Rather, they are training America's young people to care, to think, and to write in grammatical sentences. All they have to justify their hard work to themselves (and their credulous families and friends) is the tenuous belief that what they do matters. Fish's column cuts to the heart of our worst fears about ourselves and our career choice. In a globalizing, technological, capitalist economy, where do the humanities fit? Fish say: nowhere but in your own mind.

When I was finishing my dissertation at Princeton, Elaine Showalter, then President of the MLA, made similar headlines (albeit within the academy) suggesting that, since the market was so bad, PhDs in literature should look for other careers. Having just published an article in *Vogue*, she celebrated this brainstorm as the ideal solution to the plight of young scholars who would never land an academic job. At the summit of her academic career at Princeton, she had developed a

relatively successful career in journalism. Profit from the wisdom of my experience, she said: skip academe and go right to Hollywood. Graduate students all over the country threw a fit of pique and indignation similar to the one that Fish has inspired among humanities scholars. I remember being angry that Showalter saw fit to console young scholars who might never practice their trade by telling them simply to go do something else. We were trained, but there were no jobs. Today, we have jobs, but there is no funding.

To my mind, Showalter and Fish have several things in common that make their statements mutually illuminating. Both seem to have made their names as scholars only to realize that, while they were celebrities in the academy, their careers did not feel very useful (read: important and lucrative) in the world. So, they both switched to a more public venue for their ideas: journalism. Similarly, during their tenure at elite institutions training the next generation of academics, both witnessed what amounted to a crisis in their disciplines that threatened the next generation's welfare: Showalter saw universities produce too many doctorates for the number of academic positions available; Fish witnessed the evaporation of funds for the softer academic disciplines, such as art and the humanities. Instead of contesting these developments, they took them for granted and even turned the crisis into a virtue. It's a curious thing for important scholars to sit back and watch as their fields implode. We would expect them, perhaps, to come to the rescue—to be saviors. But Fish, in particular, is not interested in saving anything or anyone from time or the cultural/social/economic developments that threaten fields whose self-importance we make the mistake of taking for granted.

Does our work matter and should anyone pay us to do it? Is there a donor in our class? Fish's answer (no) is audacious. I can appreciate the fear and anger in the responses to his column, as I can appreciate the reaction to Showalter ten years ago. Posed by Fish, who finished an illustrious career and writes for the *New York Times*, the question seems a purely mental exercise; he will not lose if humanities funding stops. In this sense, the question is just like a beautiful line of poetry he treats in his class: it's an aesthetic matter with no implications for his world. It might have been better for the field if someone whose liveli-

hood was at stake in the response had dared to ask the question. But better the question be asked than not, as better a poem be read only for beauty than not at all. And I have to admit that I find myself agreeing with Fish's conclusion that the humanities can be asked neither to save souls, nor to generate revenue. I, for one, am very relieved to know that my mistakes result neither in damnation, nor in capital loss.

But I'm also confident that we should keep teaching the humanities and that profit-generating disciplines or outside sources must fund it. So I spent some time wondering how I could explain having Fish's cake and eating it, too. My issues, I concluded, have more to do with his premises than his conclusions. The premises are: 1) that secular humanism and institutional humanities (which I'll call "Humanities") are the same; and 2) that the Humanities are an end in themselves.

### **Secular Humanism Versus the Humanities**

Fish opens his column with the questions, "Do the humanities ennoble? And, for that matter, is it the business of the humanities, or of any other area of academic study, to save us?" He begins to answer these questions with what he calls the premise of secular humanism: "that the examples of action and thought portrayed in the enduring works of literature, philosophy, and history can create in readers the desire to emulate them." Fish ascribes this premise to us as educators (perhaps because Kronman does) and then demonstrates its absurdity by noting that, if reading great ideas inspired greatness and great action, then scholars of the humanities would be saints—and they are not. While "example for emulation" may be the premise of secular humanism as an idea or within its texts, it is not at all clear that this is the premise of the "Humanities": the colleges, universities, and individual professors who teach these texts. Curricula are not designed to teach students to *be* like the heroes and intellectuals in their readings, but rather to show students (force them to confront?) the motivations and ideals of these heroes and intellectuals.

Never mind the fact that, as it turns out, there is nary a figure in the literature of human history that exhibits the virtues of goodness and wisdom in great action; or they do, only to end up miserable or dead. The stories of heroes with these virtues are sad because the truly

good and the truly wise do not follow the rules of society; they make history by getting into trouble. Literature, philosophy and history tell the story of what we do wrong. Knowledge of these textual exemplars usually points up the absurdity of human endeavor and leads, rather effortlessly, to cynicism and depression. Now, cynical and depressed indeed describe the disposition of many of my colleagues, which suggests that, even when readers do imitate the heroes of secular humanism, they don't look like saints.

Given that secular humanism as a philosophy is not the same thing as the Humanities as a course of study, and that the content of humanities texts is anything but "generous, patient, good-hearted and honest," then we need to articulate the premises and goals of the Humanities differently from the premises and goals of humanism itself. The premise of the Humanities as a course of study might be articulated this way: that the examples of action and thought portrayed in the enduring works of literature, philosophy, and history can create in readers a better appreciation of humanity in all of its beauty and ugliness.

Luckily, there is no evidence against *this* premise being true for scholars and students alike. And while we cannot guarantee that any particular kind of action will follow this understanding, I think we can guarantee that if we stop seeking this understanding, real-world fields such as medical ethics and politics and law will cease to make sense.

## **Ends Versus Means**

Fish also suggests that it brings honor to the profession to say that the humanities are of no use because it means that they are an end in themselves. "Justification, after all, confers value on an activity from a perspective outside its performance. An activity that cannot be justified is an activity that refuses to regard itself as instrumental in some way." While I rather like the idea that the knowledge we teach in our classes refuses to regard itself as purely instrumental, I think it would be wrong to conclude that the classes themselves are an end, not a means. But again, I would distinguish between the ideas of secular humanism as ends in themselves (the humanities) and the institutional classes (the Humanities) that teach about how ideas can be valued for their own sake. Pleasure in beauty (or pain in shock) is an appropri-

ate goal for art, but pleasure of the high aesthetic variety that Fish describes is not a cultural value in this country transmitted through our music and our media; it must, therefore, be learned in school. In this sense, Humanities classes can be highly instrumental beyond their performance. Especially if, like Fish, we value the aesthetic pleasure of literature, we should fund the institutional research and learning that opens students to it.

Robert Newman, Dean of the College of Humanities at my university, addressed Fish's column recently in a talk for our Humanities Center. In closing, he made this statement about what Humanities scholars do: "We construct and tell the story of the human condition, in all of its beauty, horror, inspiration, and condemnation. That always has been our mission—in the past, present, and future" (Newman 2008). This hypothesizing and conceptual experimentation is why I teach in the Humanities. What we're ultimately talking about funding when we ask if the Humanities should be funded are the risk-taking and the lab facilities (the research and the classrooms) that make experiments with this knowledge, this particular form of pleasure and pain, possible. Fish ends his column on a strangely victorious note for such a defeatist essay: "The humanities are their own good." If we in the Humanities do our job as the means to understanding ideas as ends in themselves, then maybe there will be a donor in our class.

## References

Newman, Robert D.

- 2008 Salvation, Damnation, or Just Getting By: The Future of the Humanities. Paper presented at the Future of the Humanities Forum, Tanner Humanities Center, February 25, 2008, in Salt Lake City, Utah.

